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ABSTRACT

In 1987-88, 1990-91, and 1993-94, the National Center for Education Statistics' Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) presented teachers in public schools throughout the United States with a list of school-related problems and asked for ratings of their severity in their schools. This brief examines two safety-related matters, physical conflicts among students and weapons possession, and presents the percentages of public school teachers who considered these matters as moderate or serious in their schools. The data show that from 1987-88 to 1993-94, increasing percentages of public elementary and secondary school teachers reported physical conflicts among students as moderate or serious problems in their schools. The percentages of public secondary school teachers reporting weapons possession as a moderate or serious problem in their schools nearly doubled from 1990-91 to 1993-94. From 1987-88 to 1993-94, teachers in public schools with more than 750 students consistently reported physical conflicts among students and weapons possession as moderate or serious problems more frequently than did teachers in schools with fewer than 150 students. The data suggest that teachers viewed public schools as less safe in 1993-94 than they did in 1987-88 or in 1990-91. At both the elementary and secondary levels, teachers' reports of physical conflicts among students and weapons possession were at their highest levels in 1993-94. Although more frequently reported at the secondary level over time, these problems were cited more often in large versus small schools at both levels. One table and one figure are included. (Contains eight references.) (LMI)

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ISSUE BRIEF

How Safe Are the Public Schools: What Do Teachers Say?

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The nation's seventh education goal for the year 2000 aims to ensure safe schools for all students. This goal is a crucial one, as safe schools are important for the achievement of all other national and local education goals (National Education Goals Panel 1994).

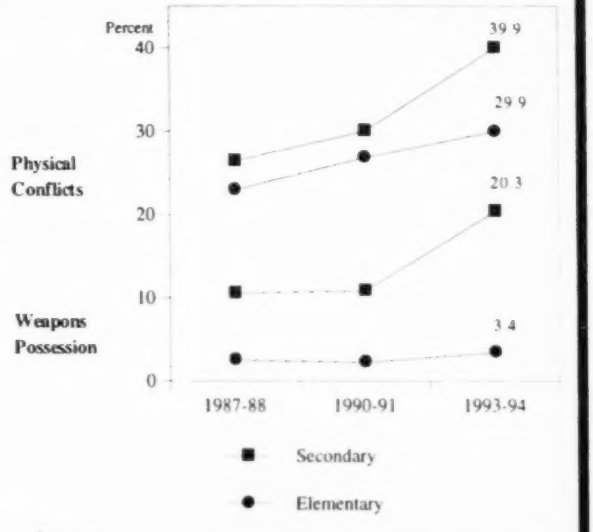
Recent public opinion surveys have found that for the majority of Americans, violence in the schools is the number one education-related concern (e.g., Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup 1994). In addition, a survey of students in public school grades 3 through 12 and their parents (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company 1993) disclosed disturbing reports and fears related to violent episodes on school campuses. In light of the views of students, their parents, and the public on conditions relating to school safety, what do teachers think about safety-related problems affecting their schools? The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), provides this perspective.

In 1987-88, 1990-91, and 1993-94, SASS presented teachers in public schools throughout the country with a list of school-related problems and asked for ratings of their severity in their schools. This brief examines two safety-related matters, physical conflicts among students and weapons possession, and presents the percentages of public school teachers who considered these matters as moderate or serious in their schools.*

From 1987-88 to 1993-94, increasing percentages of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools reported physical conflicts among students as moderate or serious problems in their schools.

From 1987-88 to 1990-91, the percentage of public secondary school teachers reporting physical conflicts among students as either moderate or serious problems in their schools increased from approximately 26 percent to nearly 30 percent (figure 1). From 1990-91 to 1993-94, this percentage increased from about 30 percent to nearly 40 percent. In addition, public elementary school teachers increasingly reported physical conflicts as moderate or serious problems over this same period, with almost 30 percent making these reports in 1993-94. In each year, secondary school teachers perceived physical conflicts as moderate or serious problems more frequently than did elementary teachers.

Figure 1. Percentages of public elementary and secondary school teachers reporting physical conflicts among students and weapons possession as moderate or serious problems in their schools: 1987-88, 1990-91, and 1993-94



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1987-88, 1990-91, and 1993-94 Schools and Staffing Surveys (School and Teacher Questionnaires).

The percentages of public secondary school teachers reporting weapons possession as a moderate or serious problem in their schools nearly doubled from 1990-91 to 1993-94.

The percentages of public secondary school teachers reporting weapons possession as a moderate or serious problem remained much the same from 1987-88 to 1990-91; however, these reports almost doubled from 1990-91 to 1993-94—from almost 11 percent to about 20 percent (figure 1). In each year, secondary school teachers reported weapons

* Teachers were provided with four response options: "Not a problem," "Minor," "Moderate," or "Serious."

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possession as a moderate or serious problem more frequently than did elementary teachers. The percentage of elementary teachers citing this problem also showed an increase for the same years, rising from 2.2 percent in 1990-91 to 3.4 percent in 1993-94. In the case of weapons possession, any concern expressed is a serious matter. In 1987-88, 42.6 percent of secondary and 19.7 percent of elementary teachers reported weapons possession as a *minor* problem. These percentages for public secondary and elementary teachers, respectively, were 46.5 percent and 22.2 percent for 1990-91; for 1993-94, they were 56.6 percent and 30.6 percent.

From 1987-88 to 1993-94, teachers in public schools with more than 750 students consistently reported physical conflicts among students and weapons possession as moderate or serious problems more frequently than did teachers in schools with fewer than 150 students.

In the 1987-88, 1990-91, and 1993-94 school years, just about twice the percentage of elementary teachers in large public schools (i.e., schools with more than 750 students) reported these problems as did their counterparts in small schools (i.e., schools with fewer than 150 students) (table 1). A similar pattern over time can be seen at the secondary level. In addition, at both the elementary and secondary levels in 1993-94, the percentages of teachers who cited weapons possession as a moderate or serious problem in their schools were at least three times higher in large versus small schools.

Table 1. Percentages of public school teachers reporting physical conflicts among students and weapons possession as moderate or serious problems in their schools, by school size and level: 1987–88, 1990–91, and 1993–94

	<150 students		>750 students	
	Elementary	Secondary	Elementary	Secondary
1987–88				
Physical conflicts	13.6	18.1	28.9	30.5
Weapons possession	1.3	7.1	5.1	14.0
1990–91				
Physical conflicts	16.1	15.3	32.1	35.2
Weapons possession	1.3	4.7	2.9	14.2
1993–94				
Physical conflicts	19.9	18.8	37.6	47.4
Weapons possession	1.9	8.6	5.7	26.5

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1987–88, 1990–91, and 1993–94 Schools and Staffing Surveys (School and Teacher Questionnaires).

Discussion

SASS data related to these two school safety issues suggest that in the opinions of teachers, public schools were less safe in 1993-94 than they were in 1987-88 or in 1990-91. At both the elementary and secondary levels, teacher reports of physical conflicts among students and weapons possession were at their highest levels in 1993-94. Although more frequently reported at the secondary level over time, these problems were cited more often in large versus small schools at both levels. Analyses of these data also raise important questions for research and practice: Which attributes of schools, particularly those with large enrollments, seem related to greater incidence of reported safety-related problems? Are there fewer adults in these large schools who are available to meet with and informally discuss things with students? How can teachers and other school staff take action to develop more positive relationships among themselves, students, and their families? How safe are private schools in the opinions of their teachers? These and other questions await researchers interested in exploring the SASS databases from NCES.

References and Related Publications:

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Issue Briefs present information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences are statistically significant at the .05 level. In the design, conduct, and data processing of NCES surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error. For additional details on SASS data collection methods and definitions, see the following U.S. Department of Education publications: *Schools and Staffing Survey: Sample Design and Estimation* (NCES Report Nos. 91-127, 93-449, and forthcoming) and *Quality Profile for SASS: Aspects of the Quality of Data in the Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASS)* (NCES Report No. 94-340).

This **Issue Brief** was prepared by Robert Rossi and Shannon Daugherty, American Institutes for Research. To obtain standard errors or definitions of terms for this **Issue Brief**, or to obtain additional information about the Schools and Staffing Survey, contact Charles H. Hammer (202) 219–1330. To order additional copies of this **Issue Brief** or other NCES publications, call 1–800–424–1616.

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